

GOURMET

AUSTRALIAN

FEBRUARY 1993

TRAVELLER

\$5.70*
NZ \$8.95
(incl. GST)

COOL FOOD

Italian Ices
Summer Fruit Pies

HOT SPOTS

California Missions
Flinders Ranges
Morocco
Left Bank Chic



Granita di caffè





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hey sit like grand, world-weary old ladies, their crumbling adobe walls and patched plaster proclaiming a dignified indifference to the high-rise towers and bustling freeways around them – gracious, melancholy relics of a distant past. Few visitors to the US West Coast know of their turbulent, sometimes violent history, for the missions of California are the Golden State's best-kept secret. But for more than a century, they played a crucial role in its history. Without them, California as we know it might not even have existed ... it might well have become part of Russia.

When explorers first sighted California's coast, they found it so appealing they thought they had discovered an island inhabited by beautiful, dark-skinned Amazons. Even the tough-minded Spaniards couldn't help but marvel at the exotic, semi-arid landscape and at the elegant but simple lifestyle of the California Indians, a peaceful, artistic people, who hunted and fished and lived in harmony with each other.

In 1769, the year James Cook set sail for Australia, a Franciscan monk named Junipero Serra, accompanied by priests and soldiers, set off from Mexico by mule train for a gruelling 1600km trek through wilderness to establish a mission at San Diego and to bring Christianity to the 100,000 Indians who lived along California's shores. Part of his mission also was to open up settlement of California and to halt the incursions of the Russians, who had already built several forts on its northern coast.

For the Spanish, monks were cost-effective colonisers. They received no pay and their needs were few. Devout followers of St Francis of Assisi, their only ambitions were to convert Indians. Serra was in his mid-50s when he set out for California but he didn't flinch from the task. Here was the opportunity of his life. The 18th century offered just two avenues to glory for an ambitious man: the army or the church. Serra, the son of a farmer, was short and walked with a limp, which ruled out any military career. So he joined the Franciscans at an early age, then travelled to Mexico to begin missionary work.

A short time after arriving in San Diego, he found him-

**Text and photography
by Virginia Westbury**

The bell tower of San Carlos Borromeo mission, left, near the picturesque town of Carmel. Right, poppies on the Big Sur coastline



The Spanish came to California to convert, then "civilise" the natives. The missions that dot the state are remnants of that dream, and a reminder of how it almost destroyed the Indian people

The

CALIFORNIA

Missions



self under Indian attack. As the arrows whistled over his head and soldiers attempted to repel the natives, the redoubtable Serra scribbled in his diary that he was worrying not for his safety but whether he would get to baptise any Indians before they were killed. Such is the stuff of sainthood, at least as he saw it.

Like most of the men of his time, he believed Indians to be heathens in need of Christianity, and no hardship, be it pestilence, hostile natives or famine, would deter him. His aim was to first convert, then "civilise" them, ultimately making them colonists in their own lands. Little did he know of the tragedy he would unleash.

Within a century, the native population of California was practically wiped out. Two-thirds died of measles and influenza. Some Indians benefited from the missions but many more perished as their culture and lands came under Spanish domain. Converts lived in huts close to the mission, which fed and clothed them and provided training, health care and education. But each convert was expected to work and if, after adopting mission life, he attempted to flee or return to traditional ways, he was ruthlessly hunted down and punished.

By the late 18th century, 21 missions flourished along the California coast, from San Diego to north of San Francisco, each a prosperous centre of agriculture, cattle- and horse-raising. From 1834, as Spanish influence waned, they were broken up and sold. Buildings and churches fell into disrepair. Some Indians went to work on nearby ranches; thousands more, unused to fending for themselves, drifted off and simply disappeared. The missions lay abandoned and neglected until they were restored early this century. To step inside them today is to experience an older, Spanish America, the America of padres and caballeros, of ranchos and presidios, the legacy of monks and visionaries who came to settle a wild and difficult land.

One of the most rewarding is San Juan Capistrano, famous for the swallows that return each year to nest in the ruins of its great church. San Juan, once the largest and most prosperous of all the missions, lies halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego. Today, the mission seems dwarfed by its surroundings but in its heyday, it was a miniature city, home to hundreds of Indians, monks and soldiers. Its industries turned out soap, candles, leather and metal goods, oil and wine; its rich pastoral lands supported sheep, cattle and grain.

In 1806, devout Indians built a massive stone church and decorated it, the first and most elaborate building of its kind in Califor-

TRAVEL

DETAILS For information about the missions or nearby attractions, contact the **US Tourism and Travel Administration** in Sydney, (02) 233 4666.

■ **Northwest Airlines** has regular flights from Sydney to the US, including non-stop services to Los Angeles and one-stop services via Honolulu from \$1650 return. **Northwest World Vacations** offers hotel accommodation in many American destinations from \$68 per night (twin-share).

■ The best way to see the missions is by car. **Cartours**, Sydney, offers car-hire packages, including collision-damage waiver and unlimited kilometres, from \$49 a day (plus tax); phone (02) 931 7777 or free call (008) 226 154.

■ California has hundreds of **B&B inns** close to the missions. Especially recommended are the charmingly renovated, country-style **Four Sisters Inns**, which offer rooms from \$US85 a night (plus tax), within a short distance of San Francisco, Monterey and San Juan Capistrano. Enquiries to 845 Bush St, San Francisco, CA 94108; fax (0011 1 415) 775 5717.

To step inside the missions today is to experience an older, Spanish America, the America of padres and caballeros

Santa Barbara also houses a library of some of the oldest books in North America, precious diaries and hand-written records dating back to the earliest days, as well as elaborate 18th-century musical manuscripts used to instruct the choir. Its museum contains hundreds of Indian artefacts as well as 18th-century furniture.

Heading north again brings you to Big Sur and Monterey, one of the most dramatic and picturesque coastlines in the world. Its sheer cliffs, plunging straight into the sea, are crowned with pines and redwoods. Otters and seals frolic in the waves and the swirling masses of seaweed beneath. Eagles circle above.

For sheer atmosphere you can't go past the second-oldest of the missions and one of the best restored, San Carlos Borromeo near the pretty coastal town of Carmel, close to Monterey. Everything in the mission, from the ancient yellow stone bell tower and star-shaped window to the bougainvillea-covered doorways and hand-carved statues speaks of its history.

A stone fountain plays in the centre of a vast courtyard surrounded by gardens alive with birds and exotic flowers. Carmel was the home and final resting place of Junipero Serra and you can see his monuments and tomb inside the church.

San Francisco is home to another famous piece of early California, Mission Dolores in the heart of the downtown area. Stalwart, solidly built, Dolores was the only building to survive the famous earthquake of 1906 that levelled the rest of the city. Now hemmed in by larger buildings, it remains an enduring relic of its founding fathers. From San Francisco, you can tour the wine country of the Napa Valley and visit the last of the missions at nearby San Rafael and Sonoma.

While the missions have largely survived intact, the same cannot be said of the people for whom they were built, the California Indians. Apart from a few reservations, all that can be seen today of their once-flourishing culture is a handful of rock paintings and carvings, the legacy of their ancestors, and a dozen or so cemeteries containing their anonymous graves. Junipero Serra, on the other hand, is remembered in statues and folklore. The Catholic Church recently declared him "blessed", the first step on the path to sainthood – which only goes to show that history is written by the winners. ☉

The Serra chapel at the San Juan Capistrano mission, right, and below, Serra commemorated in stone with one of his converts. Opposite, Santa Barbara mission, the state's most grand and elegant



nia. Alas, it lasted just six years, destroyed by an earthquake in 1812 which brought the building down, killing 40 converts. The event might have been seen as an omen. The monks never rebuilt the church; instead, services were conducted in the tiny wood and adobe chapel dedicated by Father Serra that still stands, the oldest building in California.

Within its narrow walls can be seen some exquisite examples of Indian artwork, especially the stations of the cross and hand-painted "marble" walls and columns above a gold-covered altar. The gloomy, candle-lit Serra chapel has a special atmosphere. If you pay attention, you can almost hear the prayers and voices raised in the songs of monks and Indians long ago.

North of Los Angeles is the Mediterranean-style town of Santa Barbara and the building described as the "Queen of Missions", which lies on the city's outskirts, halfway between mountains and sea. The grandest and most elegant of all missions, it was constructed in the style of a Roman temple. Its great, twin, stone bell towers glow like beacons in the surrounding countryside, especially at sunrise. Santa Barbara's mission never fell into disrepair. Earthquakes levelled it twice but each time it was rebuilt so that now it is the best preserved of the missions.

